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LIFE BOOK REVIEW

Investigating the Masaryk mystery

THE MASARYK CASE
by CLAIRES STERLING
(Harper & Row) \$7.95

In the old states of the Holy Roman Empire, and in particular Bohemia, one customary way to dispose of political opponents was to push them out of a high window. The historic mass "Defenestration of Prague" in 1618 which marked the start of the Thirty Years War apparently popularized the custom. In south-central and eastern Europe it is still remembered, and sometimes, in times of stress, revived.

When, therefore, in March 1948 Jan Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's foreign minister and the only non-Communist member of the new government of Klement Gottwald, was found dead in a courtyard of the Czermin Palace in Prague, many Czechs rejected the official verdict of suicide.

He had plunged 60 feet from the bathroom window of his apartment in the palace, which also housed the foreign ministry. He was found at dawn spread-eagled on the cobblestones, barefoot and in pajamas, dirty, his face contorted with fear.

Jan Masaryk was not only the son of Tomáš Masaryk, the revered founder of modern Czechoslovakia, but also a folk hero in his own right. For such a man suicide was unthinkable. But others—those close to him before his death, a police doctor who examined the body—had more cogent reasons for doubt. Death and imprisonment, or fear, soon silenced them.

For 20 years the case remained closed. Then, in January 1968, the Stalinist Novotný government fell and was replaced by the more democratic Dubček regime. From the end of February that year, when the censorship was lifted, until August, when the Soviet invaders reimposed it, there was free speech in Czechoslovakia. On April 5, the Dubček government ordered an inquiry into the death of



Jan Masaryk in 1947

Jan Masaryk. Dr. Kotlar, director of criminal investigation, was named to conduct it.

Fortunately—for the uncensored results of that inquiry are unlikely now to see the light of day—Claire Sterling, an American reporter then working in Prague, decided to conduct an inquiry of her own. *The Masaryk Case* is an account of it.

She began, not very confidently, by asking herself questions. "Were there enough people alive to prove anything one way or another? Who, in an endless procession of witnesses, was telling the truth and who gained what by lying? Where . . . was the hard evidence of suicide or murder?"

Patiently and persistently Mrs. Sterling interviewed every witness she could find, dozens, from an obscure security policeman living in a Prague slum to a former secretary of Masaryk's who had become an ordained minister in Scotland. Of the subjects of these interviews, she says: "I doubt that any told me the whole truth, even the part they thought they knew. Their testimony is encrusted with the imperfections of memory, by years of confinement and torture, by broken careers and lives, by political ambition, vanity or old age, by a fear they could not dismiss even when their freedom was restored."

Surprisingly, she soon discovered that one who was knowingly not telling her the truth was Dr. Kotlar. Not unnaturally, she also met with suspicion and hostility. Her first meeting with Anna Masaryk, a niece of the

dead man, began badly: "Are you going to write one of those cheap anti-Communist tracts? . . . a vulgar thriller? . . . Do you know anything about Czech history? Hus? Zizka? Comenius? Are you going to say They Did Him In, whatever anybody tells you? Because if that's your game, don't count on me."

Mrs. Sterling has not written a thriller, but much of her book does have the quality of a detective story. And a fascinating one. She is a shrewd investigator and her professional skill and ingenuity were well rewarded. Her conclusion that Masaryk was murdered seems, on the circumstantial evidence she so lucidly presents, to be the only one possible. Surely no sane person could, after reading this book, accept the recent finding of the official Czech inquiry that the death was accidental. Mrs. Sterling's response to the preposterous suggestion that Masaryk was in the habit of fighting insomnia by sitting cross-legged on his bathroom windowsill, and most unfortunately slipped off it, can well be imagined. The medical evidence that she offers on the subject of the windowsill tells a very different and more convincing story.

Mr. Ambler's most recent novel is *The Intercom Conspiracy*.

by Eric Ambler

So 4-01.2 The Masaryk Case